

Speech presented to Plenary Session
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on People, Resources, and the
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by

Peter Ittinuar

Inuit Tapirisat of Canada

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Mr. Chairman, we would like to begin by thanking you for giving us this opportunity to appear before you and express our thoughts on such a vital subject as political development in the North.

• Inuit Tapirisat is the national organization of Canada's Inuit. Inuit Tapirisat was founded in 1971 when an organizing committee of Inuit decided it was time the native people of the Arctic have active representation in concerns of development in the North, education, the preservation of the Inuit culture and ultimately, self-determination. Initially, wildlife and environmental preservation were foremost in our minds when dealing with industry and government. But it was soon realized that nothing less than a land claims settlement would ensure the right to self-determination and the running of our own affairs. That is, a land claims settlement, if negotiated in the context of terms submitted by us, would allow the Inuit to decide their economic, political and social direction within the framework of Canadian society.

The most important consequence of the formation of Inuit Tapirisat, which, by the way, means Inuit unity, is that over the few years of its operation out of Ottawa, there has been a heightening of interest in and an awareness of the political system in Canada's south. Such concepts as democracy, party systems, the acquisition of power through elections were quickly grasped amongst the Inuit. Prior to this, colonialism in the North was the rule rather than the exception; in effect, the rule of our territory by a distant state. Today, this is still true to some extent. The federal government seems to feel that the territorial government is the proper representative of Arctic northerners. Well, we did not see any Inuit names on the Carrother's Commission, which produced the famous white paper

on the formation of territorial government. The logical conclusion is that we have come up with the concept of Nunavut territory to be governed by the Nunavut government. This, we feel, is a proper, legitimate and viable alternative to the territorial government, and the groundwork has been laid out by the recognition of Inuit Tapirisat as the Inuk representative in Ottawa.

Perhaps these diametrically opposed forces are directly attributable to the British North America Act, and that these strains only point out the need for constitutional reform and development to meet the realistic needs of Canada's many groups. If this is true, and we believe it to be, then we are not alone in our aspirations as Canadians.

However, many problems, such as attitudes presently existing in the ranks of both the federal and territorial government, will have to be ironed out so that we can negotiate realistically for a land claims settlement. Although we applauded Alaska and the James Bay agreements, we feel they were variations on what were pretty much straightforward real-estate transactions. That is, in exchange for extinguishing their rights, they receive cash and a more conventional, if not a bit firmer, legal title to a much-reduced area of land.

The Inuit of the Northwest Territories do not consider our upcoming agreement with the Government of Canada as something in the nature of a real-estate transaction. We do consider it a contract, but one principally of a social and political, rather than a commercial nature. We perceive our settlement as a means by which we can regain control of the processes and institutions which make up Inuit society.

The first principle of our proposal is that Inuit must have the right to self-determination. To give effect to this, we are proposing the formation of a new agreement - a government which would find its place

within the constitutional framework of Canada, and would of course be subject to the ultimate sovereignty of the Parliament of Canada. It would be developed along the lines of Inuit political institutions, and it would exercise legislative authority in areas of jurisdiction usually associated with territorial and provincial governments.

Through a negotiated settlement of our outstanding claims, we are determined to become full-fledged citizens with the degree of political self-determination necessary to take responsibility once again for running our own affairs. I am referring now mainly to Inuit in the Northwest Territories and Labrador, because Inuit of Northern Quebec have already reached a settlement with the governments of Canada and Quebec, although as I mentioned earlier we have some serious misgivings about the constitutional legality of what has happened in Quebec.

It should be emphasized here that we are not proposing ethnic criteria for any sort of a basis for participation in this proposed government. All Canadians, Inuit and non-Inuit alike, will have identical rights and obligations within this government,

The second principle is that our ownership of land and waters be recognized simply because we have been there longer than anyone else. This means that if anyone has the right to exercise authority over our lands, that right must be in our hands.

As a third point, we are asserting the right to practice and preserve our language and culture. Without these, we cannot survive as a distinct people.

The fourth principle is that, while recognizing the difficulties involved, we are requesting amendments to the British North America Act which will provide the basis for structural reform in Inuit society.

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In the context of self-determination as our major principle, I would like to refer to the International Covenant on Economics, Cultural and Social Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. These covenants were passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1967, and were ratified by Canada in May of 1976.

Article 1, subsection 1, of both covenants proclaim, and I quote: "All people have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status, and freely pursue their economic, social, and cultural development." Article 2 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says, and I quote again: "Where not already provided for by existing legislation or other measures, each state party to the present covenant undertakes to take the necessary steps in accordance with its constitutional processes, and with the provisions of the present covenant, to adopt such legislative or other measures as may be necessary to give effect to the rights recognized in the present covenant." Through our land claim proposal, it is our feeling that we are providing the Government of Canada an opportunity to do precisely this - to give effect to the international commitments it has made.

This land claim represents, then, the legitimate aspirations of the Inuit we represent, and must be treated as such. It is essentially political, not legal, in nature, and must be dealt with as such. The claim forms a unity composed of political, economic and cultural aspects, all aspects inseparable from the whole.

The Government of Canada has committed itself to the settlement of native claims through a process of negotiation with the Office of Native Land Claims of DIAND. All aspects of claims, political, economic and cultural, must be considered in these negotiations. The appointment of the Special Representative

for Constitutional Development, Mr. Bud Drury, bypasses this process by demanding that the political aspect of claims be channelled through his office, and not through legitimate negotiations. This has been unacceptable to the Inuit and somewhat discouraging, because any attempt at a just and honourable settlement of native claims is impossible while the process has been compromised in this way.

We urge all Canadians to consider what we have said, and to make their thoughts known.

Thank you.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN THE TERRITORIES

PARTICIPANTS

<u>NAME</u>	<u>ORGANIZATION</u>
GEORGE KURSZEWSKI	I.B.N.W.T.
JOANNE OVERVOLD	I.B.N.W.T.
GINA BLONDIN	I.B.N.W.T.
TED PARRELL	YUKON CONSERVATION SOCIETY
ELEANOR MILLARD	YUKON LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
MEL WATKINS	UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
WILF BEAN	INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-POLITICAL RESEARCH & EDCTN.
CHARLES R. WHITE	INUIT CIRCUMPOLAR CONFERENCE
TERRY BUCKLE	ANGLICAN CHURCH OF CANADA
L. LOUIS DE GROOT	PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF CANADA (OBSERVER)
R. D. SPARHAM	NONE
JEAN MORISSET	UNIVERSITE DU QUEBEC A MONTREAL
PAT CARNEY	ECONOMIC CONSULTANT
JOHNASIE MANIAPIK	PANGNIRTUNG N.W.T.
ERIC NOAH JOAMIE	" "
ERIC TAGOOANA	I.T.C. OTTAWA
IAN CREEERY	N.W.T. LAND CLAIMS COMMISSION
PETER ITTINUAR	I.T.C. OTTAWA
DAVE NICKERSON	LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF THE N.W.T.
GARTH EVANS	C.A.R.C.
A. W. R. CARROTHERS	VANCOUVER, B.C.

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ITTIINUAR, P.
AUTHOR

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